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SUBJECT: DEADLY CATCH: DIVING FOR LOBSTER OFF THE MOSQUITO
COAST

¶1. (U) Summary: At least 258 divers have been killed and 850 injured diving for lobster on the Honduran North Coast over the last two decades. The Honduran Fisheries Association states that Honduras has among the highest rates of lobster diver casualties in the world. Dangerous diving procedures are responsible for the casualties. While some divers receive successful decompression treatment, those who do not face a bleak economic and health future. The GOH planned to outlaw lobster diving in 2005 but has since backed away from this plan, instead adding permits for 11 new lobster dive boats. Much of the lobster harvest, including meat from undersized and egg-bearing lobster, makes its way to United States and Canadian markets, often by way of El Salvador to avoid Lacey Act prosecutions. End summary.

Causes of the Problem

¶2. (U) In the past two decades, hundreds of Honduran lobster divers have been injured or killed on the job. Their injuries are caused by making too many dives in a day, diving too deep, coming up too fast, lack of safety equipment or even basic equipment such as depth and pressure gauges, ignorance of dive physics and an economic desperation that makes many divers deliberately disregard their own safety. Whereas a recreational SCUBA diver is likely to make three dives a day, to a maximum of 90 feet, Honduran commercial lobster divers average 12 dives a day, to depths of 80-120 feet, remaining underwater until the air runs out of their tanks. Diving with such frequency to such depths causes dissolved nitrogen to accumulate in the bloodstream beyond the limit of the human body to absorb after resurfacing. This can cause nitrogen bubbles to form in the blood -- a condition commonly referred to as "the bends," which can be fatal. Resurfacing too fast can have the same effect. Immediate treatment in a decompression chamber is the only way to avoid permanent injury.

¶3. (U) Despite multiple, repeated requests, the GOH was unable to provide a list or even a total number of injured or deceased lobster divers. EconOff reviewed a list maintained by the Injured Divers Association; this list yielded 258 dead and 850 injured. Most contacts suggest

these figures are extremely conservative. From August 2007 through February 2008, 107 divers were treated for injuries at Anthony's Key Decompression Chamber on the island of Roatan alone. During EconOff's visit, there were four injured divers being treated inside the decompression chamber. Two divers were outside the chamber with crippling limbs, and one was paralyzed from the waist down.

The Mosquito Coast

14. (U) While lobster boat crews come from La Ceiba and the Bay Islands and the diving activity takes place on reefs throughout Honduras' northern coastal seas, the lobster divers virtually all come from the impoverished northeastern Mosquito Coast, Gracias a Dios Department. No roads connect Gracias a Dios to the rest of Honduras. Access is by air or water. Centuries ago pirates built camps and ships here to prey on galleons carrying gold and silver back to Spain. Even today there is little law enforcement or other government presence and few economic opportunities beyond lobster diving and drug trafficking. Most of the 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants are of the Miskito or Pech indigenous groups, Afro-Honduran or Mestizo.

15. (U) Commercial lobster dive boats first came to the Mosquito Coast in the 1990s. Initially boats with a dozen divers, diving to shallow depths, could harvest their fill of lobsters. As the industry grew, more and more divers crammed onto dive boats. The law allows each relatively small boat to carry 35 canoes, 35 divers and 35 canoe paddlers plus the boat's own crew. During a tour of one

such boat, EconOff observed abominable diving conditions. As the lobster population dwindles, divers must go deeper and deeper to find their catch. Deeper dives lead to a vastly increased probability of injury. Often, according to both divers and crew, the boat captain will make no effort to bring an injured diver to a decompression chamber, since such an action would lead to a shorter and therefore less profitable voyage. Even if he does, the chambers may be one to five days sail away -- a delay making fully successful treatment unlikely. If a lobster diver dies while at sea, his body is placed in the freezer with the lobsters.

Assistance for Injured Divers

16. (SBU) Insurance for divers, although now mandatory, is not available, according to both the Honduran Fisheries Association (APESCA) and the divers themselves. Better equipment is also mandatory, though this has had no effect on the rate of casualties. These sources also tell us there are no contracts with the boat captains or company owners. Honduran Social Security will not cover divers, as the occupation is considered too dangerous. However, by custom, an injured diver may receive USD 750-5,000 from the boat owners, depending on the extent of his injuries, and the family of a dead diver may receive USD 5,000-7,000. EconOff interviewed several lobster divers who said these sums can be much lower depending on the boat captain. Most planned to return to diving despite their injuries. Dr. Rafael Diaz from Anthony's Key Decompression Chamber, which receives the majority of divers who seek treatment, confirmed that most divers return to work, forever facing a higher risk of more serious injury. For those partially or fully paralyzed, the options are bleak once the injury payment is expended. A few may find employment paddling the canoes of other divers or have family members who can provide long term care. Many develop bladder infections or, if paralyzed, bed sores. Several sources confirm that in this hot, humid, remote tropical climate with scarce access to medical care, such infections often lead to death.

¶7. (U) American NGOs have donated wheelchairs to the region. Some wheelchairs were brought into the country through the Denton Amendment and delivered to the region by Joint Task Force-Bravo assets. NGOs also have plans to open and operate additional decompression chambers. USSOUTHCOM has invested over USD 300,000 in a hyperbaric chamber and other renovations for the hospital at Puerto Lempira in Gracias a Dios. Such actions are helpful but do not address the cause of the injuries. In other nations, governments have taken action, such as requiring divers to use boat-mounted, fixed length air hoses, strictly enforcing their commercial dive laws, or outlawing commercial lobster diving altogether in favor of trap fishing. The GOH had planned to outlaw lobster diving in 2005, but has since backed away from this plan, and added permits for 11 new lobster dive boats. APESCA states that Honduras has among the highest rates of lobster diver casualties in the world.

Where do the Lobsters Go?

¶8. (SBU) The primary markets for Honduran lobster tails are the United States and Canada. One large U.S. seafood chain states it buys only trap-caught lobster. However, mechanisms to determine the legality or method of capture of seafood are virtually nonexistent. During a four month investigation, EconOff spoke to over a dozen contacts, each of which was certain that Honduran dive-caught lobsters were making their way, in tremendous numbers, to the United States and Canada. One mechanism may be "lobster tail

meat," which sells for USD 12 per pound in the United States. Since legal size lobster tails sell for USD 26 per pound, the most likely economic incentive to sell "lobster tail meat" would be to cover up the small size of the tail. APESCA, divers and NGOs have suggested the product enters the United States via El Salvador, which does not have a domestic law regulating the size of lobsters that may be harvested. The absence of such a law allows lobster importers to avoid convictions in U.S. courts under the Lacey Act. The lobsters are killed with a spear, then pulled out of their hiding places. No examination or measurement is made of the lobster. Undersized and egg-bearing lobster are harvested along with the rest. As a result of this tactic as well as over-fishing in general, all sources agree the lobster stocks are in decline, though specific numbers are unavailable.

An Eye Toward the Future

¶9. (U) The leaders of both the Association of Injured Divers and the Association of Active Divers are looking into alternative employment. For divers paralyzed from the waist down, construction and repair of lobster traps is an option. For future generations, there are many options, including agriculture (African Palm and cacao), fishing, eco-tourism, aquaculture (shellfish and blue crabs, inside the numerous lagoons) and forest products, including legal logging, furniture making, and traditional crafts.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) While better equipment and diver education have had no apparent effect on the rate of casualties, economic incentives have worked well with the Honduran fishing industry. An active Turtle Excluder Device (TED) monitoring program has ensured that shrimp are harvested

without harming sea turtles; failure to comply results in an embargo of Honduran shrimp from the U.S. market. Some have suggested that a ban on dive-caught lobster from the U.S. market, with a three-year grace period, would encourage divers to find alternative employment or encourage the Honduran lobster fishing industry to convert the dive boats to fixed-length-air-hose or trap boats. End comment.
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